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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 ABUJA 000852

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SUBJECT: A SNAPSHOT OF OBASANJO'S ELECTORAL PROSPECTS

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Classified by CDA Andrews for reason 1.5 (d).

11. (C) Summary: Three years ago, Obasanjo rode into office on a wave of optimism: Gone was the military; democratic rule had returned. Now, with a year until the elections, Obasanjo's prospects are uncertain. His abrupt manner, callous public remarks, and unwillingness to listen have alienated key opinion-makers and former supporters. If elections were today, he might lose regions and votes won in 1999 and could well lose the entire contest if faced with credible opposition. In fact, the PDP nomination is not a sure bet, as House Speaker Ghali Na'Abba and others are fomenting rebellion within the party to spoil Obasanjo's bid. On the positive side for Obasanjo, the power of incumbency is very formidable in Nigeria. Also, Obasanjo probably can count on support in the Northeast as long as Vice President Atiku remains on the ticket and might be able to finesse the Southwest if he can reach a modus vivendi with Alliance for Democracy (AD) Governors and moderates within the most influential Yoruba organization, Afenifere. Ultimately, one of his biggest electoral asset may be a negative one -- the lack of an alternative around whom his various opponents can easily rally. End Summary.

WHERE ARE ALL MY FRIENDS

12. (C) In 1999, President Obasanjo won a landslide victory, with widespread support in the North and Southeast. Obasanjo could not replicate that feat today, and he need not look beyond the closest mirror to identify the main cause of his diminished prospects. He came to office because others lent their power bases and constituencies. However, as with any loan, there was interest to be paid. Obasanjo owed his powerful supporters access and the legitimate political fruits that come with backing a winner in any democratic system.

13. (C) Instead, Obasanjo increasingly has been a one-man show. To many Nigerian political figures, Obasanjo is an arrogant know-it-all who eschews dialogue, siphons independent minds from the Administration and upbraids those bold enough to express different points of view. When a situation beckons suasion or cajolery, Obasanjo wields either mace or mallet. He behaves like a general in civilian President's clothing.

14. (C) A born again Christian, Obasanjo also has a self-righteous, almost messianic streak. Part of him believes he has been divinely anointed; thus, he need not listen to the counsel of most mortals, especially given that he has steered the Nigerian ship of State before. Since he gives no ear to the counsel of others, they are unforgiving in their evaluation of his performance. Unfortunately, the Government's performance has earned it and him many demerits; because he mostly has gone it alone, he must shoulder the blame alone.

The Election Map Does Not Lie

15. (C) If hired by Obasanjo, a conscientious campaign manager would suffer an acute migraine gazing at the electoral map. Regions and groups Obasanjo carried by wide margins in 1999 are tilting against him in the run-up to 2003. Regaining positive balance in these areas will take guile, money and luck.

A) Where He is Weak:

-- Northwest: This is the political heart of the North. No

one has become Head of State without the support or acquiescence of this region. Here, unfortunately, Obasanjo has lost the most ground. He has alienated key figures like former Heads of State Babangida, Abubakar, and Buhari. The revered Emir of Kano has publicly criticized Obasanjo's performance. The Arewa Consultative Forum (ACF), the region's preeminent association of luminaries, is a house divided regarding Obasanjo. However, the anti-Obasanjo camp is more numerous, vocal and active. The powerful Arewa elite still bristles over his removal of senior Northern officers from the military. They also complain that his government is corrupt, his economic mismanagement has decimated agriculture, the paramount sector in that region, and that he has given too many key positions to fellow Yorubas at the expense of Northern interests (when the Southwest arrayed against him in 1999). Last, a PDP gadfly, former Kano Governor Abubakar Rimi is contesting for the Party's nomination. While Rimi has a snowball's chance of winning, Obasanjo may further offend Northerners if he mishandles Rimi's challenge by attacking him too heavily since no one likes to see a family member publicly upbraided by an outsider.

-- Southeast: This area voted overwhelmingly for Obasanjo in 1999. Two reasons for Obasanjo's reversal of fortune are the Administration's insensitivity to Igbo political aspirations and perceived federal inattention to economic development in the densely populated region. In addition to his politically costly, yet unnecessary, war of words with popular Abia State Governor Orji Kalu, Obasanjo has criticized Igbo-organizations (Ohaneze Ndigbo, for example) for undermining security and national unity. Other Administration officials have been more acrid, labeling soldiers who fought on the Biafran side of the civil war "traitors" and deriding calls for an Igbo President as foolish. (These calls are indirect attacks against the Yoruba Obasanjo seeking a second term. Discarding the Obasanjo-Atiku ticket, opens the door to an Igbo as number one or two on the presidential ticket.) These statements by government officials cut deep into Igbo sensitivities, giving substance to Igbo grievances that they have not been reintegrated into the national political system as full partners.

-- Middle Belt: The western Middle Belt, e. g. Niger and Kwara, is tied to the Northwest. Obasanjo suffers the same afflictions there as in the Northern heartland. In the Eastern Middle Belt, he is in hot water with the Tivs, the Middle Belt's most populous and politically agile group. Tivs are bitter over the October 2001 massacre of Tiv villagers by federal government troops. They also suspect the Government of siding with their ethnic rivals, the Jukun, because Defence Minister Danjuma, a close Obasanjo ally, is Jukun. However, to Obasanjo's benefit, fundamentalist Christians (whether Tiv or of another ethnicity) are numerous in this area, and many would tend to vote Obasanjo over most Muslim alternatives.

1B. Finding Some Support:

-- Southwest: Obasanjo lost here in 1999; taking it this time will require walking a delicate tightrope, something Obasanjo does not do particularly well. Slain Justice Minister Bola Ige, a stalwart of Yoruba politics, was making inroads toward rehabilitating Obasanjo in this region despite belonging to an opposition party (the AD). However, as Ige's assassination shows, the Southwest is not monolithic, and Yoruba politics can be fractious, even dangerous. Yet, many Yorubas are willing to support Obasanjo out of ethnic unity; they realize the President in 2003 either will be Obasanjo or a non-Yoruba. However, Obasanjo's desire to control the Southwest through the PDP fouls majority Yoruba sentiment. It is a case of right ethnic group, wrong party. His best bet for winning the region is to cut an "incumbents deal" with AD Governors: in such a deal, he would promise not to actively support their PDP opponents; in exchange the Governors would tacitly endorse, at least not actively oppose, him in their states. However, if he continues to press for PDP primacy in these states, support based on ethnic solidarity will yield to each AD governor's individual interests in his political self-preservation. Initial signs are not positive. One of Obasanjo's Special Advisers is running for Governor of Ogun, and there is no sign that he objects.

-- Northeast: Primarily because of Vice President Atiku, who hails from Adamawa, the ticket should do well in the Northeast. Yet, Atiku's loyalty may be frangible. Many believe Atiku is double-dealing and would gladly pull the rug from under Obasanjo if that would give Atiku the party's nomination. In any event, the Northeast is not as pivotal as the Northwest or Southeast, and Atiku still is in trouble

with many Northern leaders over his waffling over the introduction of criminal Sharia in the North.

1C. A Toss-Up

-- South/South: This area is tougher than the others to read because there is no one dominant group. Obasanjo has some powerful detractors here but also has wheeler-dealer Works Minister Tony Anenih, an unabashed political operator who apparently believes that, no matter how bad things are, elections can be bought. While he may not be viewed with much respect elsewhere, Anenih has sway here. Much will depend on the deals Anenih can work with state governors and other political leaders. Because most oil facilities are here, revenue and resource allocation questions between the federal and state governments will loom large in the lead-up to elections.

----- ENEMIES TO THE NORTH OF HIM -----

17. (C) After Obasanjo, former Head of State Babangida is the most discussed political figure in Nigeria. Because IBB helped bankroll the President in 1999 and because he is one of few Nigerians who casts a nationwide shadow, the withdrawal of his support is a major blow. Obasanjo will be hurt more if reports of Babangida's active opposition prove true. A close associate of both Babangida and VP Atiku, recently informed us that OO and IBB had a very stormy telephone conversation in January after the President accused Babangida of fueling National Assembly opposition to him. The two hung up on each other. Reportedly, Obasanjo later tried to make amends but Babangida has resisted detente. Babangida is said to have responded with cold silence when Atiku asked if he would back Obasanjo-Atiku in 2003. Several IBB-for-President campaigns are underway, while the Man from Minna does not acknowledge any of them, it is widely believed he funds them, if for no other reason than to keep the political pot bubbling. Babangida reportedly is also funds two unregistered political parties, the UNDP and NDP, both of which have support in the North and Southeast. The Southeast is a region where Babangida has assiduously cultivated support. Abacha-era Minister, former Senator from Akwa Ibom and current UNDP stalwart Don Etiebet said in early March that the party's Presidential nomination awaited Babangida if he wanted it.

18. (C) Other Northern interests, including the ACF, are sending out feelers to other areas of the country; their liaison with groups in other regions, particularly the Southeast, spells trouble for Obasanjo. ACF leaders have journeyed to the Southeast several times, ostensibly to discuss ethno-religious violence. The ACF has inserted itself as a mediator in the Tiv-Jukun feud in the eastern Middle Belt. In both cases, talks may have veered toward politics and toward channeling local disgruntlement with Obasanjo into real political opposition. In early March, it was announced that Northern and Southeastern leaders would meet in Abia State to discuss national unity and internal violence. Curiously, leaders from the Southwest were not invited to this session hosted by Obasanjo antagonist, Abia Governor Orji Kalu, who also has links to Babangida. This line-up suggests that conference organizers may be exploring the potent North-Southeast axis that has decided previous Presidential elections while keeping Yoruba-centric candidates, e.g. Awolowo, from realizing their aspirations.

----- Enemies from Within -----

19. (C) Obasanjo faces a growing rebellion within the PDP led by House Speaker Na'Abba. Personal animosity dates back to 2000 when the Presidency unsuccessfully tried to dump Na'Abba as Speaker. Since the electoral controversy erupted last December, Na'Abba has challenged Obasanjo on a variety of issue from fuel price hikes, the January police strike, disclosure of Assembly Members salaries, to the federal budget. Na'Abba orchestrated a public debate in the House which blamed Obasanjo for Nigeria's woes and labeled his leadership inept. That debate has the markings of the opening salvo of a concerted effort to keep Obasanjo from the party's nomination. Since then Na'Abba not only has pinpricked Obasanjo whenever he can on substantive issues like the budget and the threatened police strike, but the Speaker has been at the forefront of efforts to unite party dissidents in order to make a public statement against Obasanjo's candidacy. Perhaps even more troubling for

Obasanjo, PDP Chairman Audu Ogbeh appears to be listening to the malcontents. Recently, Ogbeh felt compelled to state publicly that no candidate is preordained, and that he would not allow any party nomination to be orchestrated in frustration of the majority's will. (Having helped Ogbeh to the Chairmanship less than six months ago, Obasanjo cannot readily dump him now.)

DON'T COUNT HIM OUT

10. (C) . Given a few months of relative peace without major communal violence, if the economy does not dip, and if he learns to listen and accept a little help from his friends, Obasanjo's popularity perhaps can bounce back. Additionally, the aura of incumbency is very strong in Nigeria. While everyone may grumble, the benefits that accrue from being on the right side of that power and the hardships of being on the wrong side will keep many people from breaking formation. Last, some Obasanjo opponents hate each other as much as they dislike the President. While agreeing Obasanjo should walk the plank, they will have a tough time agreeing who should take his place. The Obasanjo camp will try to exploit these cleavages to keep the opposition from coalescing.

COMMENT

11. (C) Obasanjo is in deep trouble. His popularity has declined and he is estranged from much of the political class, particularly in the all-important North. Opponents know that Obasanjo rode the bank accounts and goodwill of others into office. With many of his former backers now angered by his brusque manner and unremarkable job performance, these opponents feel Obasanjo is very vulnerable as they do not believe he has a loyal political machine or constituency to call his own. However, by virtue of his very office, Obasanjo has a political machine -- the federal government. If used prudently, this is the most powerful, influential machine in the nation.

12. (C) Comment Continued. For Obasanjo to bounce back will require a level-headed strategy. The outlines of that strategy must include an attempt to regain some support in the North and Southeast by making amends with members of the political elites in both regions who have not completely written him off. Additionally, he will have to avoid fighting with AD Governors and Afenifere in the Southwest. Obasanjo should also try to douse the ardor of his strong adversaries by breaking bread with some key figures that oppose him. Last, and more importantly, he must govern better. This means a lot less international junketing and a stronger focus on two key domestic issues -- internal insecurity/communal violence and the struggling economy, particularly the near-moribund agricultural and manufacturing sectors.
Andrews